

The Crisis in South African Education

Jeff Guy, Umsebenzi Online, Johannesburg, 8 August 2012

We are confronted by it daily: the failure of education at every level: attempts to remove the stifling legacy of our educational past brought to nothing by inflexible pedagogies, inadequate teaching, stifling bureaucracy, and inefficient administration all contributing to the waste of the funds and material upon which young peoples' futures depend. In the press, at conferences and workshops, this contemporary crisis is in the public view. Open comment and criticism of this kind are essential attributes of the democratic approach, and will lead, one has to hope, in the direction of radical improvement. But in the past fortnight I have been confronted by another dimension of the crisis in education. While it might appear to be very different I believe it is one that also has its roots in our history, and is as difficult, to solve.

On 16 July 2012 Business Day published an open letter to Blade Nzimande in which the writer wondered how a prominent and powerful South African political figure could espouse a doctrine so incapable of dealing with today's problems as Marxism. In reply I wrote an article which suggested that Marx's ideas still had pertinence in the contemporary world. Deliberately avoiding direct reference to contemporary South African affairs or the general history of communism, I concentrated on one set of themes: that the consequences of war, want, and waste threaten not just lives, but life itself; that conventional policies seem unable to find solutions to this, and that Marx's lifelong attempt to understand the nature and demands of capital deserves informed consideration, not frivolous dismissal.

In so doing I didn't expect to change the minds of Business Day's readers. From its content and arguments, one can make a considered guess at its target audience - informed South Africans, in positions of some standing, interested in learning more about the world, the business world especially, but holding what might be called conventional attitudes and points of view. An article in defence of Marx's relevance to the present global crisis might nonetheless, I hoped, persuade some readers that it was no longer enough to cover ignorance of what Marx actually wrote with hand-me-down prejudice. But what I didn't expect was not just the ferocity, but the inadequacy of so many of the responses to the debate which followed, characterised

not just by ideological bias and short cuts which miss the point, but by such ignorance of the great themes in modern history - that is, of the world that has made us and we have made.

Marx, Marxism, Communism, are not merely interchangeable terms - they are connected of course, but these connections have to be made by argument, not mere assertion, and necessitate a confrontation with the most contested and significant debates of modern times. However, not content with using them outside of any historical context they were then extended into fields way beyond the ones I had selected. To the mafia - ridiculously; to Stalin - wrongly but understandably; and in one article, incredibly, to Hitler. Once this door was open it was then possible to make the outrageous statement that Marx was personally responsible for the deaths of millions.

Arguments of this kind which fail to distinguish between individual evil and universal tragedy make it impossible to comprehend both the magnificent and the terrible themes of the modern era. These include the technological and scientific achievements that Marx celebrated and their potential to alleviate so many of humanity's burdens. But at the same time they were, he believed, human achievements and a human legacy, not the inheritance of a particular propertied class to be used in perpetuating its power.

However, as it developed within the twentieth century, capital used its unprecedented strength to extend and advance itself. Those whom it exploited resisted, and looking back on the past century we can see something of the cost. It includes two terrible global conflicts, unprecedented civilian casualties, totalitarianism, imperialism, and economic catastrophe within a world eventually divided into hostile capitalist and socialist blocs. In all of this Marx's ideas were used and abused not only by those who opposed them but amongst those fighting in their name. As a result just what Marxism is, and who embodied or betrayed Marx's thought, remains a subject of intense controversy to this day. But not to Business Day's contributors who assert the existence of an easily identifiable, all embracing source of evil in the modern world - monolithic, unchangeable Marxism.

But Marxism should be seen as a historically dynamic set of ideas which can be used to track, organise and better understand the events, the divisions and the conflicts that make up the modern world, and in the process reach a greater understanding of ourselves and the society in which we live. And this is not easy. It requires proximity and distance. Youth and maturity. It demands a critical approach. It cannot be done by the repetition of received ideas: it means drawing on accepted interpretations and recognised achievements, but always with the option of criticising them, of creating something new for a new world. It is a social process that requires hard work backed

by all the resources that society can afford. We have a name for it. It is called education.

The contemporary debate on education in South Africa has dealt largely with the very young who are being failed in our own times, and the youth who have been failed in the past. But the reaction to my article has persuaded me that the crisis concerns not just the educationally disadvantaged, but the advantaged as well. Those with whom they differ are dismissed with an arrogance and ignorance redolent of the red-baiting of the Cold War. The easy association of the ideas of a nineteenth century economist with the horrors of twentieth century totalitarianism reflect an outdated anti-communism - indeed one cannot but suspect the shadowy, lingering presence of a state of mind that identified any challenge to the status quo, all meaningful protest, any argument for radical change, with communism and was given expression in the Suppression of Communism Act of 1950.

A new democratic state needs new ideas with which to confront new problems, urgently in a world where local problems are increasingly global. But they are never entirely new, the future demands the presence of the past, in order to create fresh, dynamic, answers. And to do this we need new approaches to education: for those young enough to take advantage of them, obviously; to repair the damage done to those already disadvantaged, of course; but, from the evidence of the recent debate in the Business Day, also for those whom the bright light of educational privilege has blinded.

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